

TENNESSEAN OP-ED: LESSONS OF TRAGEDY REVERBERATE TODAY

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reverberate today

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Other Views

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at least four lessons that we should learn from the unspeakable tragedy of
Sept. 11, 2001.

1. Never
again. We must protect our country from all enemies who seek to destroy us.
National defense is the first duty of government.

We have the finest military, intelligence and domestic security agencies in the world, but we were caught off guard by the coordinated hijacking of commercial airliners for use as guided missiles. We did not understand the nature of the enemy well enough to detect or disrupt the conspirators. We need sustained alertness — vigilance but not paranoia — to keep us safe.

After Pearl Harbor at the start of World War II, America vowed to never again be surprised by a foreign enemy. For 60 years, our oceans helped protect us. Today new threats like cyber-war have shrunk the globe.

2. Thank our first responders. Until disaster struck, most Americans did not adequately appreciate our firefighters, police, emergency medical workers and other first responders. These brave men and women sacrifice for us every day because they are ready for the car wrecks, fires, crime, tornadoes, hurricanes, epidemics or terrorist attacks that threaten us. They face dangers much larger than any paycheck could compensate. Many of them are volunteers. No medal can give them the honor they deserve; we owe them our heartfelt praise.

Some of the bravest first responders wore no uniform and had no training. They were the passengers on Flight 93 who took down their own plane over Pennsylvania so that it could not be used to destroy our nation's capitol.

3. Harden our targets. In the event that our efforts at self-protection fail, we must be prepared to limit the collateral damage. This requires a tough-mindedness and self-discipline that our pioneer forefathers lived.

Whether it is limiting the spread of this fall's H1N1 flu virus with better hygiene, protecting our computers and identities from theft, paying attention to tornado alerts, or refusing to panic after the sound of an explosion, we can limit our vulnerability. Don't give our adversaries a bigger target than our open society already offers them. When we are unprepared, we can end up being our own worst enemies.

4. Sharpen

our strategy. Just as our enemies' tactics evolve, we must remain flexible enough to keep them off balance. A fascinating debate is occurring now on whether our war in Afghanistan is working after eight years. At a recent roundtable discussion of retired generals in Nashville, all but one expressed serious misgivings about our continued military presence in that nation.

The key is

not so much whether we give the recently promoted Gen. Stan McChrystal a chance to deploy his new approach in Afghanistan, but whether we can always have a civil discussion in this country about our realistic military options around the world. To be able to debate the merits of war without impugning anyone's patriotism is a great source of strength.

America's greatest resource is our resilience, our ability to bounce back from tragedy. We bounced back after 9/11 and, as long as we retain that ability, we will remain the greatest nation on earth.